

Pentagon shoots across space station's bows

- Internal dispute threatens progress
- Military options cause global row

Washington

THE issue of whether the US manned space station will be built with the collaboration of the advertised partners overseas — Canada, the European Space Agency (ESA) and Japan — is coming rapidly to a head. It is now up to President Ronald Reagan, who must soon settle the dispute among several of his government agencies that could spell the end to international cooperation on the US manned space station.

The question is whether the Department of Defense can or should have unlimited access to the space station, something that other nations participating in the project have said they cannot accept.

The National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA), and the Departments of State, Defense and Commerce are all involved in the debate over international participation in the space station. The Defense Department showed little interest in the space station until last December. But late last year, the Pentagon asked that negotiations with other countries should be put on ice until its own role had been more fully articulated.

When negotiations resumed in February, it became clear that direct Pentagon involvement in the project would cause

serious problems for international partners, notably Japan and the members of ESA (the European Space Agency).

Government agencies have not so far been able to respond to these anxieties. Discussions were continued throughout March and into April, but ultimately broke down without an agreement. Each US agency involved has now prepared a briefing paper that will be delivered to President Reagan this week.

Meanwhile, the Defense Department has made its position public by releasing a letter dated 7 April, 1987, from Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger to Secretary of State George Shultz. Weinberger warns of "paying too high a price for international cooperation". He urges that the US negotiating position should explicitly reserve the right to "conduct national security activities on the US elements of the Space Station, without the approval or review of other nations".

Weinberger is also anxious about a one-way flow of US space technology to international partners who could also be industrial competitors, and discouraging of the temptation to elevate the concept of "equal partnership" to the point at which it might dilute the symbol of US leadership in the space station.

NASA and the State Department have argued that any agency of the US government should be permitted to use the space station, provided that is consistent with international agreements on the peaceful use of space. NASA has consistently said that the space station would be used only for peaceful purposes, a position that may be at odds with Pentagon interests.

Ironically, the Defense Department has no specific plans for using the station, but is merely seeking to retain its options for the future. John Logsdon, an analyst of US space policy at George Washington University, says the current debate goes to the heart of future US activities in space. Logsdon says Weinberger's letter is an example of the Defense Department's fight for the "soul" of the US space programme.

Although Reagan has publicly endorsed international cooperation on a civil space station, he cannot afford to ignore the Pentagon's wishes. Reagan is being asked to decide the argument about policy on the space station at great speed: all parties are interested in resuming negotiations by the end of this month.

Joseph Palca

Another shock for Europe's space planes

London

CONTINUING pressure from the US Department of Defense to retain the option for a military use of the space station has surprised and disturbed the European Space Agency (ESA), says Dr Wilhelm Brado, head of cabinet at ESA in Paris.

The ESA covenant supports space research for exclusively peaceful purposes; the letter from the US Secretary of Defense, Mr Caspar Weinberger, to the Secretary of State, Mr George Shultz (see left), is clearly perceived as a threat.

Although the official US position has not been made explicit, European space administrators are clearly concerned at the implications of Pentagon pressure. "If they take this decision... we are completely out", declared Brado bluntly.

"This was meant to be a civilian space station", he said. "Is that offer being maintained, or is it being changed, with all the consequences that may entail?"

ESA's participation in the manned space station has been fraught with difficulties even without proposals for military use of the project. Negotiations on terms for the international effort have stumbled in the past over questions of financial returns and European autonomy.

The next negotiation between the US National Aeronautics and Space Administration and ESA had been scheduled for next week, but Brado says it is not now clear whether that meeting will go ahead. "Perhaps our delegation needs more time, or perhaps our American friends need more time to make a decision on the content of this letter before we can meet." He says the United States must decide if it will "go forward alone if the cost of cooperation is too high". He added: "We would certainly regret this decision — but if it is a clear-cut decision, then we would have to make our own decision."

ESA members agreed in 1985, that in the long term Europe should be autonomous in its space research, with the capability to launch payloads into orbit when and where it chooses. That plan may become more immediate. "Our ministers will have to reconsider the issue; it's not impossible that we'd decide to go completely independent", Brado says.

The first indications of a change in the US position came at the end of December, when the Department of Defense announced its intention to play a part in the space station. But Weinberger's letter setting out the Pentagon position underlines the difficulties in achieving international cooperation. **Kathy Johnston**

Espionage denied

London

SOVIET protests to the French Foreign Ministry, refuting claims that Soviet citizens had attempted to obtain classified information on the Ariane rocket could "tarnish mutually beneficial cooperation between the two nations, particularly in the area of peaceful space research", according to Moscow radio. Commenting on the protests, Moscow's Francophone service for France and Belgium said the two countries had had a successful joint manned space mission in 1982, and that preparations are now under way for a second such mission.

Soviet denials of the alleged espionage have put special emphasis on the superiority of Soviet space technology. Ariane's cryogenic engine (the alleged target of espionage) will be able to put a payload of 21 tonnes into orbit not earlier than 1995, the Soviet commentators note, whereas the Soviet Proton carrier, which has a similar payload, has been in operation for more than five years.

Vera Rich